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Baby Grand

I am jolted awake by the train starting up. I had been sitting on it for over an hour when I must have drifted off. I never know when departure time is. As the cars pick up speed, I look outside. The world rushes past the window and I remember the last time I rode the train. I was on a business trip to Boston. All of those trips blend together now, but I remember this one distinctly. It was a hellish experience; the incompetent workers (though I am reluctant to call them such, they hardly *worked* at all) seated me in coach. I was wearing my best traveling suit, and while I admit I had dropped a bit of my breakfast on the lapel of my jacket, I refuse to believe I looked that *common*. It’s odd recalling a time when a bit of spilt coffee on my suit and a seat on the train costing less than top dollar were the biggest of my concerns.

I turn from the blur of trees rushing past and my eyes lock with those of a stranger. I hadn’t noticed him sitting there before, but he is staring back intently. I say hello and he does not reply. I twist my mouth into a smile, forgetting for a moment that it must look more like a grimace with my teeth being gone. His eyes sparkle, and I ask him where he is from. He does not answer. I ask him where he is going, and he only stares. I’m from New York, I tell him. He does not leave and I take this as an invitation to continue.

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I’m a financial market advisor. I tell wealthy people what to do with their money. I have an office in a building in New York City, and from my window I can see the Atlantic Ocean. Often I imagine that I can hear the sound of the waves crashing. I like the idea that when they crash, they don’t take anything down with them. They just fall, quietly, and then retreat to where they came from. I was born in 1907 and raised by my mother in Hudson, Massachusetts. She was a maid and she worked mainly for people who lived in Boston. She would go to the city everyday, and before I was old enough to stay home alone she would bring me along. It seemed like she worked for a new family each month. It wasn’t until I was eight that she kept a job for longer than a year. She began cleaning house for the actor Norman Whitten. If you’ve ever seen the short, “Alice in Wonderland”, he played the Mad Hatter and a fish. Despite his lack of real fame, he and his wife had company over almost every day, so they needed her to clean just as often. Well by that time I was in grammar school. My mother would leave early each morning before I woke, and come home long after I had finished my schoolwork and gone to bed. I only saw her on weekends, and often not even then. I essentially raised myself. I rarely felt lonely because solitude was customary.

In the eight years that my mother had worked for Whitten she never took one day off. The week of my sixteenth birthday, she asked for six days leave and he gave it to her. My birthday was on a Saturday that year; my mother started preparing the house on Monday. I was more confused than grateful for the attention, because I had never had a birthday party before. I wondered who was coming because we had no family that I knew of, and I was surprised when she said that “grandma” would be sleeping in my room. I didn’t ask because I didn’t care. To be honest, the whole ordeal seemed odious.

By Friday, September 18, the day of “grandma’s” arrival, the house was spotless. My mother had cleaned every inch of the tiny house, and on top of that she dug out all of my certificates of achievement not only from school but also the half-season of baseball I played in first grade. Then she turned to me, with the same look in her eye that she had right before she set to tidying something that would overwhelm a lesser woman. She told me this: “At 6:45 tonight, your father’s mother will arrive. You will be clean and sharply dressed. You will speak with perfect diction and maintain strong eye contact. You will act impeccably and if she is like I remember, she will still find faults. Your job is to stand tall and act confidently, like you were born with gold running through your veins.” And then she handed me a suit box and I went to my room to put it on.

The moment I opened the box, I did not see a striking, expensive suit. I saw the trip to Washington D.C. that I could not afford to join my classmates on. I saw the nice flowers that I couldn’t buy for the only girl I had ever been on a date with, because my mother said she could not help. I saw the *bread* that my stomach had ached for each morning and night when I was a child before I learned how to get the day old bread from the bakery on the way to school. I donned the suit in anger, like it was a medal I had won for having a terrible childhood. My grandmother had not even arrived and resented her very existence.

At 6:45 that night, exactly when she said she would, our highly anticipated guest arrived. I offered to carry her bags to avoid looking at her, but was forced to make eye contact when I heard no reply. Her eyes were piercing, the same cold slate as those of the father I had only seen in photographs. Her lips were thin and her skin aged but not dull. She removed her hat, keeping me frozen in her gaze, and uttered the first of many commands that I would hear over the next two years: “Stand up straighter. I won’t have any kin of mine, legitimate or not, looking like a destitute cripple.” That set the tone for the rest of that day and the next. She criticized everything I did, from setting the table to my use of adverbs. I would have expected myself to grow angry at the derision that she showed me in my own home, but to my surprise, I only wanted to work harder for her approval.

Saturday night, after my birthday dinner, I learned the reason for her visit and my mother’s stress. I cleared the table and walked the three feet into our diminutive kitchen, from where I heard my grandmother casually say to my mother, “Well, we don’t need to stay another night. He is far from adequate but it might not be too late to mold him into a proper gentleman. The driver is outside, you can tell the boy to pack his bags. I will wait in the car.” It was a moment before I realized she was talking about me. I then understood that I had just completed a 24-hour long audition. I hadn’t time to think before my mother turned towards where I was standing (for she knew that I had heard) and she put on a mask of joy, artfully throwing in a touch of sorrow. “Arthur, I have great news! You get to finish out the school year in New York with your grandmother!” she said. I didn’t bother pointing out the fact that school had only been in session for two weeks. She looked sad though I imagine what she felt was closer to remorse and guilt. She felt guilty that she was hardly affected by my departure. After all, a mother would expect to be miserable at the exodus of her only child. “I can help you pack your bags if you like…” She said hopefully, her voice lifting near the end. I let her because it would keep her busy, keep her from crying. Maybe it was love. More likely, it was spite. Spite towards the woman who got all of the glory of raising an honors student without having to do any of the work. I didn’t care that we had no money! What I wanted was a mother whose lipstick-smudge love remained evident on my cheek all day at school, despite my efforts and embarrassment. I wanted a mother who, instead of working overtime during the holidays so she could buy me a bar of chocolate, would accept her paid days off and simply spend time with me. Of course, if I let her cry and hold me, then all of her guilt would melt away and leave her feeling like a real mother, a real victim. So I turned away from her beseeching eyes and waited for her to bring me the suitcase, cutting any tie I had to my childhood.

I spent the next two years living in my grandmother’s brownstone in Manhattan. She was fabulously wealthy from the wills of her three deceased husbands. She taught me manners and elaborate rules for keeping conversation going. She taught me how to subtly undermine whomever I was speaking to so that they would unknowingly respect me as their superior. I learned how to command a room with my voice, but also how to use inveiglement to my advantage. She was harsh and cruel and would rap my knuckles with whatever she had handy when I misspoke. She was vindictive, but when she sat behind a piano she relaxed. Her malice melted away, replaced by blithe contentment. As the ivories lightened her temperament, I found myself fervently desiring the ability to play. When she finally consented and acknowledged that I was worthy of the music, she began to teach me. My knuckles darkened with bruises invited by yet another avenue for reprimand, but I loved every moment. I was awful at first, and one night, when my fingers were near bleeding from the punishment they were enduring on behalf of my maladroit talent, my grandmother turned to me and said, “You are despicable. You are weak and gangly, you are a mediocre elocutionist and you have the grammatical capabilities of a bullfrog. Your mother is nothing, your father is nothing, and to say you are made of weak substance is generous. This piano, this instrument, is made of the finest maple and lacquer, and the most costly ivory available. You will never be worthy. So stop playing like you want it to bend to your will! You will not win. Bend to its will, or you will fight it forever.” After this, my playing did not improve. My disposition, however, escalated exponentially. When studies would become too stressful, or the New York rain would beat down my spirits, I would go to the piano and play, and I would be okay. It was not long until I would be at that seat every day, and eventually, I began to like the sounds I heard.

A week before my eighteenth birthday, my grandmother told me she had a surprise. The maid brought down a suitcase and I took it from her. The woman who took me from my home when I was sixteen and gave me a new one, then proceeded to push me through the threshold and into the cold air. I stood blind for a moment before seeing the car waiting for me. I walked down the steps of the brownstone and into the cab. After driving for five minutes, I asked where we were going. “University” was his reply.

I got my masters degree in business and economics in three years at New York University. I did not see or speak to my grandmother until the day I graduated in August of 1928. After the ceremony, with hardly a word of salutation, she walked briskly to her car and I understood I was to follow. I got into the car after her and the driver took us to the tallest building on Wall Street. Without turning to me, she said “Go on! You’re going to be late for your interview.” I stumbled out of the car and my eyes slowly rose, following the building all the way to where it scraped the sky. I instantly recognized it as one that I had studied in economics class, and I knew this was serious. I entered the building, my footsteps echoing like an alarm warning of an intrusion. When I left, I didn’t notice them.

I went back to the brownstone and remained there until I had made enough money working as an assistant to a trade advisor to rent my own apartment. After fourteen months of inveiglement, I managed to make my way from my initial position of chore boy to the peak of my career: stock trade advisor. It was this that I was doing on Thursday, October 24, 1929. I started out the day like I usually did, floating on the numbers that would drown anyone less practiced: opening at 305.85. Absentmindedly, I mused over something I had read in the paper that morning; “It has been twelve months of unprecedented advance, of wonderful prosperity. If there is only a way of judging the future by the past, this new year will be one of felicitation and hopefulness.” I had a meeting with one of the men I advised and I told him that it was as good of a time as any to buy shares. I mentioned the rising stock dividends and that the market gave investors relatively easy money. He didn’t know what he wanted, or how much of it, which generally irritated me. How such thick people had such thick wallets was always a mystery to me. That day though, my spirits were too high to be dashed by some dense millionaire. I had patience that day because everything was going well. I explained to him how stock exchange works, and he ended up investing a large amount of his fortune. During the day the numbers fell 11%, which was only barely a stock market correction. By closing, it had regained and ended at 2% down for the day. I left work that day and returned home for the night, musing about the possibility of hiring my own assistant. Work was going so well and the market seemed steady. The market had been going up nearly 20% each year since 1922. With any luck at all I could buy my own townhouse by next fall, and purchasing my own baby grand piano did not seem far off. I didn’t know, however, that trading volume was thrice the normal amount, and bankers were doing all they could to prop up the market. I spent the weekend with my grandmother and her piano, blissfully ignorant of the chaos that was ensuing. On Monday, the market had fallen despite the stocks bought fervently by the bankers. At twenty-two years old, my age made me an outlier in my profession. However, I had enough experience to know that this was only the beginning. Over sixteen million shares were sold in the mayhem of Tuesday. The market was my world, and when it crashed, it brought me down with it.

I visited my grandmother again on Wednesday. I knew then that she had made and invested much of her money in the market. When I got there, she condemned me for worrying, and ushered me back to my cab.

Over the next five months, the company I worked for lost one eighth of its workforce. Not even the top advisor could afford an assistant, and the secretaries were being replaced nearly each day, as soon as one would come along who would work for less. I was walking to work one Monday in March and I passed by a gas station. I glanced over and caught the eye of one of the employees. I nodded politely, and kept walking but I had an odd feeling that I had seen that man before. I wondered where, and why he turned away so quickly, almost as if to hide his face. Suddenly, I realized- the boy who worked at the gas station was the very same who held my job as an errand boy to one of the top advisors after I was promoted. I was sure of it. But there was a disparity; the boy who had worked in my building was a college graduate. How had the economy come to this? I lowered my head and quickened my step. I got to my building, and into the elevator, my head still swimming. From the corner of my eye I saw the elevator attendant shift uncomfortably. I looked up, and it was not the usual man. Instead, in full bellhop attire, there stood Jonathan Mercer, an advisor ranked above me. I was shocked into silence at seeing a man that I had looked up to now in a position that made him much my subordinate. He shifted again, even more uncomfortable now that I stood gawking. I didn’t know what else to say, so I just asked for my floor. He replied, “Arthur, er, Sir, you are wanted on the top floor.” I was confused for a moment, but then I understood. “If it’s not too bold of me to interject, you can always ask for another position. When they told me, I asked if there were any other spaces available. That’s why I am in here. They let me start today so I wouldn’t have to go home to my family. It was embarrassing at first, but at least I will have something to bring home. There are men much worse off than me…” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. It didn’t matter that I was there. These were the words he had been saying to himself all morning. When the elevator reached the top floor, I gave him an obligatory nod, and started off, but turned when he cleared his throat. His palm was outstretched and his eyes were ashamed. I dropped a dime into his hand and all but ran off the elevator.

After I collected my belongings from my office, I went to my grandmother’s house. I rang the doorbell and waited a moment. From my place on the stoop I could hear the low burblings of a radio in the kitchen. “When you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put that money in a safe deposit vault…” President Roosevelt explained through the static. One of the maids let me in. The house smelled of cold cream and elixir. The caregiver looked worried and weary. She said to me, “She is in the parlor, at the piano. But before you go you must know, she is not well. She has been complaining of headaches and crying out at all hours, claiming to see things that are not there. Scratches have been appearing on her face and arms, Sir. We think it is because of the money…” She hadn’t finished before I strode past her, fighting the urge to run. I found her sitting on the piano bench, with her head down and her face away from me. She didn’t turn when I entered, so I went to her. I stopped just behind the bench, afraid to startle the frail woman. Slowly, she turned her face towards mine. There were scratches on her face, and her wrinkled skin hung off of her cheekbones like crushed velvet drapery. Her hands lay in her lap like wounded creatures. Her eyes shocked me not by their power but by their dullness. I saw no evidence of the light and fire that had frozen me the first time I met her. She looked at me angrily, as though she resented the intrusion. Then, she relaxed as she realized who I was. The very moment she began to look calm, her countenance changed again, this time into a grimace of sorrow so unlike herself that I felt no empathy. She cried out, her voice making the empty house seem even more terribly large. “They took all of my money! They took it *ALL*.” She wailed, sounding grossly like a little child. “And they took my hands. They broke my hands. They don’t *work* anymore.” She tried to play, but the stress must have amplified her arthritis, because her fingers produced only harsh discord. This sound only made her cry louder. Then, suddenly, she stopped. She looked at me, or through me really, and uttered a chain of curses too slanderous to be repeated here on this train. “YOU are the one! YOU took my money! I gave it to you and you hid it and now it’s GONE.” Her eyes grew so hateful, yet still cold and unseeing. She rose and walked toward me slowly, haggardly. I walked backwards, away from her, and when she lunged I turned and I ran straight out the front door. I stopped as soon as the door closed, just at the bottom of the steps to the brownstone. I was panting though I hardly ran three yards. I heard the sounds of struggle inside, and then a muffled cackle came from within; a sort of screeching laugh that got louder and more hysterical until it finally stopped altogether. For a moment, all was still. Our fair president continued, “together we cannot fail.” Then, the door opened and the maid rushed out and ran right into me, saying “She’s gone, sir! She went into fits of laughter, and then let herself drop, and she hit her head on the stairs. She had nothing left, Sir, and I believe that drove her over the edge. You must be wary of people who have nothing to lose…” I turned and left as she spoke. There was nothing there for me anymore.

I went to my apartment and filled a bag with all of the food I had, a change of clothes, and the five dollars I had left to my name. I didn’t bother with the bank; I knew it would be futile. All the while I thought of my other options without truly considering them: I could ask for another job. I could live off of my grandmother’s life insurance. I could visit my mother. I could sell apples on the street beside fellow discarded businessmen. They bought boxes of fruit for $1.75 and sold each piece for five cents. Doing that, I could make just over 1 dollar in a day. Just over one dollar of pure pity. “Buy an apple a day and eat the depression away.” With the hopes of leaving this nauseating possibility behind me, I headed out of the door to my apartment for the last time, when someone opened it from outside. It was a large man in a large suit. Standing behind him, I recognized the man I had advised on the Thursday before the Crash. He pointed to me. “That’s him.”

I came to in a bathtub. It took a moment to get my bearings. The brute had enough decency to leave me in my own apartment. My jaw hurt, and as I recalled what had happened, I realized I was lucky to be alive. Then I remembered the crash, and the fact that I had *nothing* and I changed my mind. How cruel, how heartless to let me live! I stood, ignoring the pain in my legs and chest. I tripped and fell getting out of the bathtub, and the pain was almost enough to drive consciousness away again. For a moment I laid there, on the cold linoleum, until I felt a sharp pang in my back. I arched my back laboriously, and reached for the offender. My hand came back to me holding a shard of mirror. I made the mistake of looking into it; I saw mainly red. I wiped the blood from the glass and looked again, but the same rouge remained. I dropped the glass and stood again, with difficulty. I braced myself on the sink and looked into what remained of the mirror above it. My hair was matted with my own blood, and my nose looked criminally crooked. Its blood dripped down to my lips, which had been gashed open by my own teeth. The teeth, however, were not where I looked. I had had enough of my own appearance and I didn’t care to look further. I splashed my face with water and grimaced through the sting of the pure, clean substance of my dirty offended self. I did not waste time looking for my belongings, but simply stepped over and through that chaos and signs of struggle that remained of my apartment. I walked out of my building, keeping my head up and my eyes forward, and ignoring the looks of horror and terror. I had nothing left to lose. Anything else would simply kill me, and death would be a godsend. I felt invincible. For the first time in my life, *I* could choose where I would go next. I walked straight to the train depot, the one where you might have seen me board if you were here then, and I crawled onto the first freight car that I saw.

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I had become so engrossed in my own story that I didn’t notice that my companion had left. Where he went is beyond me, because the train hasn’t stopped since I began my tale. I get the sudden urge to play the piano. I pretend to play an invisible baby grand, just the kind I would have bought for myself, when my hands start hurting. I look at my hands and notice that my knuckles are broken where they weren’t before. Then I see my arms are covered in scratches that were not caused by the ex-millionaire’s hit man. I come to the conclusion that it must have been the stranger. I knew there was something wrong with him by the way he looked at me. He must have attacked me while I was telling my story… Or I drifted off and continued in my sleep and the old devil took advantage of my moment of defenselessness… Never mind that. I feel so free! No business meetings, no catering to rich people’s desires… All of the sudden I find this hilarious. The old man? I erupt into laughter, and tears of hysteria fall down my face and onto the hospital bed.

Attribution Of Research

1. "History of NYU." *New York University*. New York University, n.d. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. <http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/history-of-nyu.html>.

* 1894- classes were held on campus in Bronx

2. Kyvig, David E. *Daily Life in the United States 1920-1940: How Americans Lived through the "Roaring Twenties" and the Great Depression*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002. Print.

* Almost everyone knew someone who had become destitute
* Virtually everyone was left vulnerable
* Some people saved as much money as possible
* Some people spent money the instant they got it
* 1/3 of families had one or no money maker
* In 1929 the highest annual incomes were found in New York and Boston
* Highest annual 1929 income was $1,000
* Middle income people’s situations had recently improved and their expectations had grown had most severe setbacks
* Pacific Northwest apple growers sold crates of apples on the streets to the jobless.
* Crates cost $1.75 each and apples usually sold for 5 cents, earning a lucky man $1.75 in profit

2. Press, Petra. *The 1930s*. San Diego, CA: Lucent, 1999. Print. Cultural History of the United States.

* Many men felt demoralized because they couldn’t support their families
* Many left families to become hoboes
* Some managed to keep fulltime jobs
* Those who kept jobs had paychecks severely cut
* Over 9 million savings accounts were wiped out
* Engineers and architects worked at gas stations
* College grads worked as office aides
* Men with PhDs ran elevators
* Organized crime grew in popularity
* Many more gangsters and outlaws
* ¼ of workforce (12-15 million people)= unemployed
* Some managed to keep full time jobs
* Those who kept jobs had severe paycheck cuts

3. Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats." Address. *The American Presidency Project*. The University of California, Santa Barbara, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2012. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/fireside.php>.

* Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president during depression
* “When you deposit money in a bank the bank doe not put the money into a safe deposit vault”
* “It’s your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail.”

4. Schultz, Stanley K. “Crashing Hopes: The Great Depression”. *American History 102.* William P. Tishler, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2012. <http://us.history.wisc.edu/ hist102/lectures/lecture18.html>.

* Invest because of rising stock dividends
* Market was relatively easy money
* Families broke down
* Many hoboes hopped trains
* College grads pumping gas
* Businessmen sold apples on the street
* Rise in insanity and suicide
* Public blamed brokers, bankers and businessmen for depression

5. Smiley, Gene. “Great Depression”. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics.* Library of Economics and Liberty, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2012. <http://www.econlib.org/library/ Enc/GreatDepression.html>.

* Creation of social security

6. Taylor, Nick. "The Great Depression." *Great Depression (1930's) News*. The New York Times, n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2012. <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/ timestopics/subjects/g/great\_depression\_1930s/index.html>.

* Exposed those who had bought stocks with borrowed money
* Use of credit led to foreclosure

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